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Thematic issues: gender and all forms of discrimination, in particular, racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

Statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

* E/CN.6/2001/1.

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The Bahá'í International Community is pleased that the Commission on the Status of Women is focusing global attention on the impact of racism on women at its forty-fifth session. Bahá'ís the world over — regardless of gender or ethnicity — have longed for and promoted both the advancement of women and the elimination of all forms of prejudice, including those based on race, ethnicity, and gender.

While women are the ones primarily affected when race and gender inequalities coincide, the human race as a whole is disadvantaged and its progress retarded by these injustices. The Bahá'í writings state, "As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs."[1]

The disadvantages and injustices suffered by women of oppressed groups living in societies where resources are limited have been highlighted over the past two decades in international forums such as the United Nations. Yet the social structures that sustain discrimination and exploitation have proven remarkably difficult to dismantle, in part because the disadvantages experienced by women oppressed because of race produce unacknowledged benefits for women and men belonging to favoured groups. The reluctance to acknowledge these privileges perpetuates injustice and hinders society from developing in healthy ways.

Bahá'u'lláh has written, "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."[2] The Bahá'í community is dedicated in principle and practice to justice as the foundation for unity. It is, therefore, committed to the abolition of racism and to the promotion of the equality of women and men at all levels. Within the family, Bahá'ís seek to teach their children the values of oneness, equality and justice. Bahá'ís value interracial marriage for its positive effect on society and educate their daughters in the same curricula as their sons. If the family is not able to provide for the education of both, parents are encouraged to give preference to the girls, as they will be the first educators of the next generation.

Bahá'í administrative structures are designed to promote both the equality of women and men and the abolition of racial prejudice. Women are fully eligible to elect and to serve on local and national governing councils. In Bahá'í elections, if the vote results in a tie between two people, one of whom is a member of a minority group, that person is automatically considered as elected. In Bahá'í communities both women and men learn the art of "consultation", or the frank and courteous exchange of views. Social and economic development projects have established schools specifically for girls, training institutes for women, and village health care programmes in remote areas of the world that promote the well-being of women and children, thereby benefiting the whole society.

In international forums, the Bahá'í International Community has long encouraged a fundamental change in beliefs and attitudes about race through education and the promotion of the concept of world citizenship. It has also worked in those forums to advance the status of women. The road to justice is a long and thorny one because, ultimately, it demands a change of heart. Indeed, only when "the injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honour of one, the honour of all",[3] will the human race have faced the challenges inherent in social structures based on domination and refused to accept injustice as the natural order of things.

Notes

[1] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912*, 10th ed. (London, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), p. 133.

[2] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 116.

[3] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 168.